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Grave Issues

Restoring Boston's Historic Burying Grounds

Because of their tremendous historic and cultural significance and genealogical associations, Boston's historic burying grounds are some of the country's most important cultural landscapes and represent some of the most tangible links to our past. Dating back to 17th-century settlement and spanning through the evolution of garden-style "rural" cemeteries, these resources are collectively a multi-volume history of the region—a set of three-dimensional textbooks awaiting perusal. Boston's burying grounds contain some of the country's finest and most representative examples of 17th, 18th, and 19th-century funerary art and iconography. Ranging from the starkly foreboding death's head and the peacefully winged cherubic motifs to the refined neo-classical willow-and-urn motif and grand obelisks and monuments, Boston's gravemarkers and monuments punctuate a lengthy cultural, historic, and aesthetic timeline. Although the nature of other types of historic and cultural resources has been tenuous and fleeting, these landscapes stand steadfast in remembrance of thousands of Bostonians. Quintessential community spaces, these sites are the final resting places of a diver-

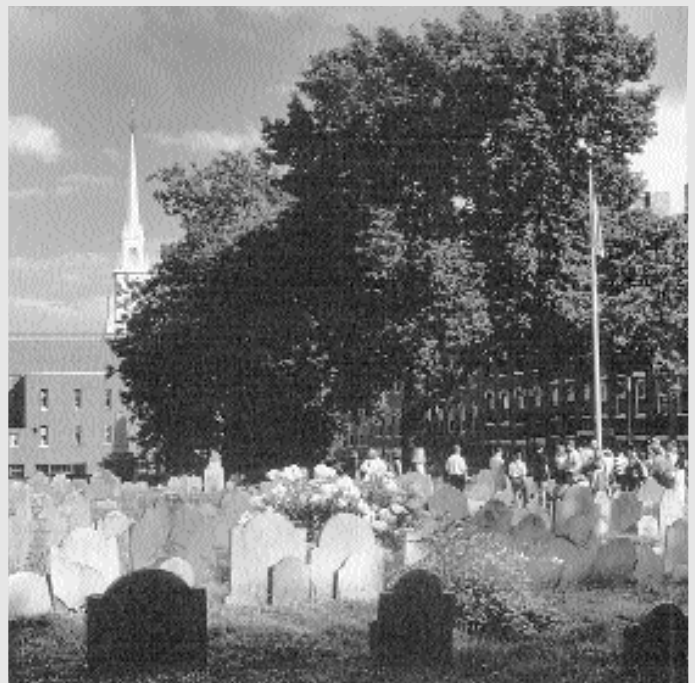
sity of community members—a true honor roll of our nation's Puritans, patriots, and noble citizens.

Ranging in date from 1630 to 1841, Boston's burying grounds are located in the heart of nearly every neighborhood. These resources are indices of a community's growth and development. Their location serves as an indicator of initial settlement. The collection of artifacts, their size, materials, level of ornamentation, and range of carving styles chronicle the life of a community and provide a revealing cross-section of a community's socio-economics and culture. Ranging in size from less than one-half acre to more than three acres, most of Boston's burying grounds remain intact, although three have lost land to road expansion and building development. Some burying grounds boast a collection of more than 2,500 gravestones and monuments—the predominant material is slate, although marble, brownstone, and granite are well-represented.

Fourteen of the sixteen burying grounds curated by the city have always been municipally owned; two were originally associated with "first parish" Congregational churches. It is important to note that there are far more than 16 burying

Copp's Hill Burying Ground (c. 1659) is the second oldest burying ground in Boston proper. A designated site on Boston's Freedom Trail, a 2.5-mile urban walking trail which connects 16 different sites linked by the Revolutionary War theme, this site is visited by 3,000 people per day during peak tourist season. Located in the historic North End, a densely-settled neighborhood with a scarcity of greenspace, Copp's Hill also serves as an important passive recreational open space for neighborhood residents. Old North Church steeple is visible in background.

Copp's Hill Burying Ground is the final resting place of thousands of Boston citizens and contributors to the process of nation-building, including the Mather family, generations of prominent and well-published religious leaders, Prince Hall, Patriot and founder of the Black Masonic League; and Robert Newman, who hung the lanterns from Old North Church to signal a waiting Paul Revere. Copp's Hill is the three-dimensional index of the North End community, poignantly reflecting its 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century seafaring economy and ethnically diverse community. Crafting traditions and people's life's work are etched on gravestones for posterity review, including trades such as "cooper," "cordwainer," "shipwright," "sea captain," etc. Additionally, there are more free blacks buried in this site with gravestones than any other Boston burying ground. Photo by Stephen Sears.





King's Chapel Burying Ground (1630) is the oldest burying ground in Boston proper. Located in downtown Boston, it is a designated site on Boston's historic Freedom Trail. The final resting place of Puritans and Patriots, this honor role includes John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and "City Upon a Hill" visionary; William Dawes, who rode to Lexington with Paul Revere to warn John Hancock and Samuel Adams that the British were afoot; Mary Chilton, who was the first woman to step foot off the Mayflower in Plimouth Colony; and thousands of others. Photos by Stephen Sears.

The death's head motif is one of the most widely-used carving motifs on Boston's 17th and 18th-century gravestones. Some historians and material culturists have correlated the New England settlers' staunch religious philosophies to the stark carving motifs and epitaphs. Old City Hall is visible in the rearground.

places in the City of Boston; the other sites range from parish burying grounds, family burying grounds on homesteads, to sites originally-associated with hospitals. Because of ownership issues, these burying places do not fall under city control.

Four of the sixteen burying grounds owned by the city are designated Freedom Trail sites; the remaining are located in Boston's neighborhoods—originally distinct communities which were annexed by Boston in the 19th-century. By virtue of being on the Freedom Trail, a 2.5-mile, urban walking trail which guides approximately 3 million

visitors per year to 16 historic sites linked by a Revolutionary War theme, and by virtue of being the final resting places of many notable founding mothers and fathers, these sites are heavily traveled tourist destinations. On the other hand, the neighborhood burying grounds, the burying places of contributors to more locally-oriented history, serve as important passive recreational green-spaces, particularly in neighborhoods where open space is at a premium.

Over the last three centuries, interest in Boston's burying grounds has waxed and waned corresponding with historical, cultural, and genealogical trends—one of the most dominant trends was the Colonial Revival. In the 1970s, as our nation's Bicentennial approached, Bostonians began looking to the tangible evidences of their heritage. After years of deferred maintenance, Boston citizens felt that the debilitated condition of the burying grounds—a condition which was being realized by towns, municipalities, and grass-roots groups across the country—was both a disgrace and a sign of insolent disrespect. Boston's

Historic Burying Grounds Initiative (HBGI) evolved out of this growing concern about the condition of these invaluable, irreplaceable historic resources.

In response to this call to action, local and statewide historic preservation groups gathered in a round-table fashion to discuss and thoughtfully plot-out a course for the restoration of these cultural landscapes. The sense of urgency, felt by many, was tempered by an acute awareness that expedient solutions too often compound the problem at hand. The City of Boston Parks and Recreation Department, the proprietor and steward of the sites, realized that it was imperative that this restoration effort be a well-conceived, carefully-planned endeavor. Therefore, the city declared a moratorium on all repairs and restoration. The round table planning group developed a "shopping list" or wish list of concerns.

The HBGI was born out of these planning sessions. By 1983, a stone-by-stone inventory, a massive effort which catalogued every aspect of more than 16,000 gravemarkers and monuments, was completed by a fleet of supervised volunteers. The HBGI sought volunteers and interns through local colleges and universities; and small-scale stipends were secured through the National Trust for Historic Preservation's now-defunct Yankee Internship program. The inventory has served a key role in gravemarker reset and conservation projects and is an important resource to genealogists and researchers. Since the mid 1980s, burying ground and cemetery survey work has evolved into a refined science; the HBGI's efforts represent some of the earliest attempts at comprehensive documentation. A lack of funding prohibited photographic documentation of every site. Contemporary inventory efforts are, however, incorporating photography as an integral, indispensable component of survey.

In 1985, a Master Plan was funded and commissioned to detail a step-by-step, comprehensive restoration and revitalization of each site. Produced by a interdisciplinary team of structural engineers and landscape architects, this plan addressed the burying grounds from all preservation perspectives—addressing structural, curatorial, archeological, and landscape architectural components—and treated them as organic, complex landscapes. The end of 1986 marked the publication of this document and the beginning of a full-scale implementation of the Plan's top priorities. The Master Plan articulated clearly that the proposed undertaking—the comprehensive restoration of Boston's 16 burying grounds—was a \$6.1 million endeavor. When considering this figure, it is important to note that, in 1986, this was a sum yet to be raised or allocated.

Because the HBGI was founded on the premise of sound preservation planning and implementation, all construction specifications and drawings produced for projects have complied with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Structures*. Many of the burying grounds are located in historic or conservation districts or are listed individually on the National Register of Historic Places. Design review is, therefore, a necessary component of the restoration process. Although selection of designer services and construction award is based on the public bid process, the HBGI includes language in Requests for Qualifications (for design services) and bid advertisements which specifies a mandatory number of years experience in dealing with historic landscapes, historic masonry structures, trees in historic landscapes, etc. In addition, many specifications have required contractors to employ an archeologist, industrial hygienist, or other specially-trained professionals to address unique

aspects of a specific project.

Using the priorities detailed in the Master Plan, the HBGI pursued the projects which presented the greatest risk to visitors and passers-by (i.e. leaning and bulging walls and heaved walkways) and to the resources themselves (i.e. hazard trees which could damage gravemarkers and monuments, elements which were debilitated to the point of losing integrity). Because the stability of many

of the below-grade tombs and vaults had been compromised seriously by age and originally-deficient construction methodologies, perimeter/retaining walls and tombs were the first to be addressed via annual allocations from the city's Office of Capital Planning.

Gravestone and monument conservation and reset was funded largely by private and state sources. The HBGI has followed a series of different conservation specifications. In the beginning, under the leadership of Columbia University's Preservation Program, the HBGI specified the use of epoxy repair techniques and later polyester resins for adhesive repair of gravestones. After 5-7

years, however, many of those early repair attempts failed because of the adhesive material's sensitivity to ultraviolet rays, thermal conditions, and external stresses. In the early 1990s, the HBGI started to specify a mortar-patch method, a high-lime content mortar, on both slate and marble; this method has proven successful to date. Very limited brownstone conservation and marble consolidation has been pursued.

In instances where funds are yet to be raised or successful adhesive repair is not likely, grave-marker and monument fragments which are in danger of theft or further vandalism are inventoried and removed from the site and placed in the City of Boston's Archaeology Laboratory. The primary mission of the fragment collection program is to curate fragments until they can be returned to the field. Based on a set of criteria, the HBGI project manager assesses the fragments' ability to be safely reset in the field. If fragments are not large or intact enough to be safely reset according to the HBGI specifications, they are permanently accessioned into the fragment collection. This collection is curated by the City of Boston's Archaeologist.

With annual appropriations from the City of Boston Office of Capital Planning and significant infusions of private money, over the past 10 years the HBGI completed nearly \$4 million in restoration work—or approximately one-half of the original priority list. Defined as a public/private cooperative venture, the HBGI was granted 501(c)(3) status via a City of Boston Trust Fund account. The Fund for Parks and Recreation, the HBGI's fiscal agent, provides the program with the ability to seek and receive funds from charitable foundations, corporations, and individuals. To the extent allowed by law, the Fund for Parks and Recreation provides a tax-deductible, charitable opportunity for contributors.

In addition to having a Master Plan as a priority/need-based guide, one of the keys to successful fundraising and site management grew out of relationships with local constituents and corporate "friends." Seeking local interest and support, the HBGI forged strong partnerships with organizations such as neighborhood associations, historical societies, corporate abutters; formal "friends" groups resulted. "Friends" groups are truly the "eyes and ears" of these resources, and in some cases have assumed varying levels of responsibility. For example, members of the Friends of Copp's Hill Burying Ground, a formally incorporated group, open and close the site daily and water newly-installed trees. The corporate Friends of the Granary Burying Ground serve as a key funder for construction projects and public programming efforts. The combination of public and private dol-



The Joseph Tapping stone (1678) is one of the most iconographically-significant gravemarkers in King's Chapel Burying Ground. This work of art features the reverse "S" scroll, the hourglass, Father Time snuffing out the candle of life, and the Latin inscriptions "Fugit Hora" [time flies] and "Memento Mori" [remember death]. Photo by Annmarie Rowlands.



The Franklin obelisk is one of the most visible and visited architectural elements in the Granary Burying Ground (1660). The Granary is located on Boston's Freedom Trail. Benjamin Franklin, born in Boston, erected this Quincy-granite obelisk in memory of his parents. This burying place has more founding fathers than any other burying ground in Boston. This honor role includes Patriots Paul Revere and James Otis; John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and Robert Treat Paine, signers of the Declaration of Independence (Paine was also a signer of the Constitution); victims of the Boston Massacre; and Benjamin Franklin's parents. Photo by Annmarie Rowlands.

lars, partnering of efforts, and shared stewardship initiatives have been highly productive.

In the mid-1980s, the maintenance component of Boston's 16 inactive burying grounds was transferred from the city's Cemetery Division to a three-man crew administered by the Parks and Recreation Department. Deferred maintenance had created overgrown, uncontrolled landscapes.

Located in the Granary Burying Ground (1660), the third oldest burying ground in Boston proper, the Ruth Carter (1697-98) stone is one of the finest and most representative examples of colonial gravestone carving. Unlike most other contemporary carvings of like subjects, the Carter stone illustrates well-proportioned skeletons standing on Doric column bases. Some believe that this carver used medical books from England as a template for his carving. Photo by Annmarie Rowlands.



With the guidance of the HBGI, dedicated community groups participated in annual clean-ups which worked to carve the originally-intended features and planned components out of the landscapes.

Because of damage to the artifacts, the Master Plan mandated the implementation of new maintenance techniques. These techniques included the elimination of side-collecting lawn-mowers to reduce scratching and chipping damage, and the use of plastic-whip weedwackers. Dedicated weekly maintenance and seasonally appropriate work has made a significant impact on how these sites contribute to local streetscapes. Likewise, the community's treatment and perception of them has changed. Correspondingly, with increased care and activity, there has been a reduction in mistreatment, vandalism, and general urban misuse.

Because trees are some of the most visible elements in these landscapes, and in some cases, represent some of the oldest trees in a given neighborhood, pruning, removal, and installation is also an important management focus. Trees have inestimable value in urban landscapes and are true character-defining features of these evolving resources. Many of these sites had significant 19th-century "lives," a time when landscape plans were created and implemented. In a commitment to interpret these sites in a comprehensive way, the HBGI curates both artifactual and living components. The HBGI has addressed tree management via annual city tree contracts and other public and private funding sources.

In 1996, the HBGI is celebrating its ten-year anniversary. In an effort to continue preservation projects, the Parks Department is preparing to embark upon a reevaluation of the HBGI's site-by-site Master Plan. This project will be contracted to an interdisciplinary professional team, which will include a structural engineer and landscape architect. The goals of the project are to chart the HBGI's progress and evaluate remaining needs, update site-specific and comprehensive cost estimates, and re-map sites to reflect existing conditions. Because of the Boston Parks Department's commitment to public process, the HBGI's Community Advisory Board will be reactivated and consist of representatives of each neighborhood. All findings will be published in a volume which will replace *The Boston Experience*, the HBGI's current publication. The Department anticipates completion by Fall 1997.

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